The Makhnovists and the Mennonites

- War and Peace in the Ukrainian Revolution -

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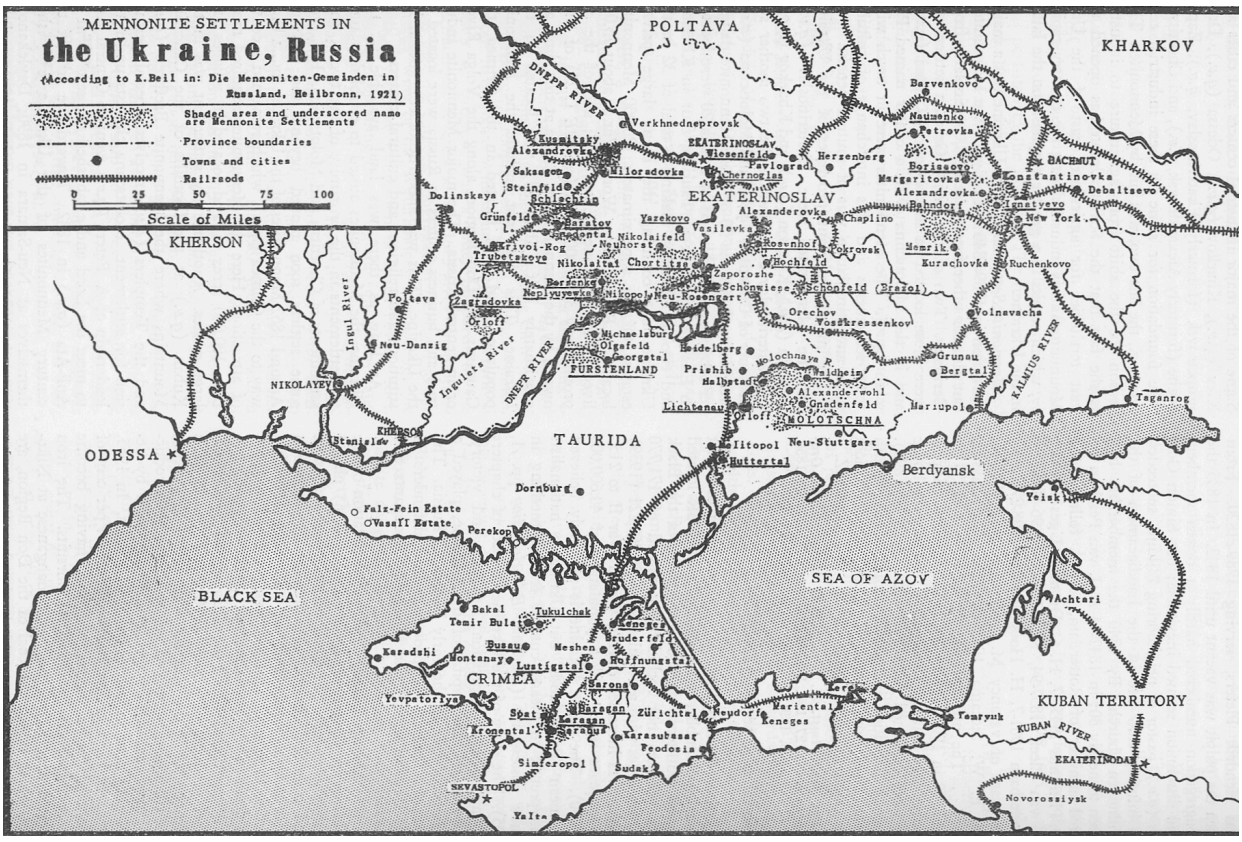

A Mennonite Selbstschutz unit photographed in the Ukraine 1918

Introduction

This is a story about massacres that occurred in Southern Ukraine between October 1917 and December 1923. The victims, avowedly-pacifist Mennonites, included women and elderly people. In Eichenfeld, almost one third of the village population was killed, including a 65 year-old blind woman. All the massacres occurred in the vicinity of the Makhnovist army. And then, they stopped.

In 1924, Nestor Makhno was arrested in Danzig, charged with having persecuted farmers in the Ukraine (Skirda). He escaped before trial, and the terrorization of pacifist Mennonites is now the most serious stain on the Makhnovists' reputation. The Russian Mennonite diaspora recall the 'uncontrolled terror' inflicted by the Makhnovists as they slaughtered hundreds of men, women, and children; 'Driven by mad violence,' the mob displayed 'the bestiality of men who had become raging animals'; 'Helpless and defenseless, the Mennonites were exposed to the horrible reality of an unprecedented, bestial anarchy that expressed the basest human instincts'; 'This targeted horror lives on in the Mennonite history as a kind of ultimate Manichean abomination'. 'By the time of the German withdrawal,' writes one memoirist, Makhno had an army of 100,000 followers, some of them lifelong criminals, all hostile to humanity, their hatred directed against everybody. Having stolen most of the horses in the countryside, they exemplified terror on horseback as they carried out their program of plunder, rape and murder with a vengeance.' The story of Anarchist Leader Nestor Makhno has become a centerpiece of Mennonite identity and passed between generations.'

The Makhnovists' victims named them as a roving horde bandits, they bemoaned their spotty support and complained that while the peasantry lent help to the Bolsheviks, and sometimes supported them, they aided the Makhnovists in whatever way they could: Spies and informers of the Makhno partisans were in each village, in each grange, roamed all the time

and everywhere, dressed as beggars, as comrade-deserters, workers from mines exchanging coal for bread etc,.’

CHAPTER: Meet the Makhnovists

Let us start by considering some historiographic problems particular to the Makhnovist movement. First, the chaos of the times and the plethora of warring parties make it sometimes difficult to attribute responsibility for a particular crime. In addition to the White Army, the Red Army, Petliura's Nationalists, and the Makhnovists, there were various independents: isolated peasant insurgents, gangs of bandits, mobs of comrade-deserters, paramilitary bands of Cossacks, White militias, and the armies of independent warlords. 'The number of anarchist green armies,' writes Felix Schnell, 'may be estimated in the many thousands and the ataman armies in the hundreds'. To add to the confusion, 'there were a number of allied groups that called themselves Makhno partisans'; it was an established fact that the Greens and other marauders, aware of the terror inspired by Makhno, often posed as Makhnovists when descending upon a village.' Most interesting of all, but of great significance for our subject, in the Autumn of 1919, the armies of Petliurist ataman's joined the Makhnovists as allies. According to Victor Azarov, 'these atamans included Matyazha, Melashko. Gladchenko, Ogiya, and others'; at least two of these commanders, Matyazh and Levchenko, were later summarily executed by the Makhnovists.'

Second, all the non-Bolshevik contemporary accounts were written by former Makhnovists (e.g., Arshinov, Belash, Voline, and Makhno himself); while Voline's memoir is often critical, and Belash's was supervised by Glavlit, these accounts obviously have a suspect interest in defending the reputation of the Makhnovist revolution. The Bolshevik victory and resulting dictatorship meant that for the duration of most eyewitnesses' lives, the ruling Communist party had a monopoly on what was published. Most of the propaganda produced during this period in the Soviet Union and by the Comintern has little historical credibility.

These conditions have contributed to a curious Makhno mythology. In Sukhogorskaya's eyewitness accounts (2002), for example, Makhno was

accompanied by a personal assassin: a mute who always wore a Russian sailor's uniform and would kill anyone to whom Makhno took a dislike. Sukhogorskaya's accounts sound crazy, but it takes only a little archaeology to uncover foundations we recognize: Makhno did have a close associate – Fedor Schuss – who was famed for wearing a sailor's uniform. He was a renowned womanizer, a brilliant cavalry commander, an eccentric dresser, an avid attention seeker; he is always in the center of photographs. Between the historical Schuss and eyewitness accounts of the mute assassin there is an intermediary story, a tale presented by the Bolshevik Dybets, who describes Schuss strangely 'silent and motionless as a statue,' and informs us that he was an expert in martial-arts, who could kill a man with a sudden attack. Makhnovist legends reflect the hopes and fears of different sections of the population at a particular historical moment.

One Mennonite mythology includes the story of Heinrich and Elisabeth Wiebe. One of their servants promised to warn them if the Makhnovists were raiding with 'a shrill whistle.' At this point, the Wiebes were to come down to the river where the servant would row them to safety. The servants hid Mr. Wiebe in a large haystack, and when the Makhnovists arrived they bayoneted the hay; Wiebe escaped because they never struck home. This requires historians to believe that the Makhnovists were incapable of searching a haystack. Fortunately for Mr. Wiebe, the Makhnovists finally became bored and moved on.'

CHAPTER: Meet the Mennonites

The history of the Mennonites, like the history of the Makhnovists, begins with a peasant uprising. Their story starts during the Radical Reformation, when hundreds of thousands of peasants fought their feudal rulers in a war both theological and economic. Readers of Luther Blissett's historical novel, Q, will be familiar with such figures as Thomas Münzer, who sought a Christian commonwealth of total equality, and also with the role of the Anabaptists, who believed Christianity necessitated living ethically as well as professing faith. But while some Anabaptists participated in violent uprisings such as the Münster rebellion, others opposed the use of force. Many of the latter group followed the teachings of a preacher called Menno Simmons – after him, this group was later named the Mennonites. One of the central tenets of their theology is therefore 'the avoidance of the sword'; i.e. a commitment to non-violence.

In 1917, 50,000 faithful inhabited seventy Mennonite villages in Eastern Ukraine. It is worth considering the origin of these settlements. By the eighteenth century, used to persecution and displacement, the Mennonites had acquired a reputation as hard workers able to cultivate marginal lands. In 1768, Catherine the Great bequeathed them Steppe land from which her armies had recently forced the Cossack tribes-people. The terms of this settlement were generous: the costs of transport and building were paid by the government; each family was granted around 175 acres of land and a loan of five hundred rubles; each village was granted a forest and large free pasture; and the farmers were exempted from taxation for thirty years. They prospered. After 1817, Mennonites were allowed to buy land in addition to that provided in their original land grants. Some became successful entrepreneurs, and at the outbreak of WWI there were 500 Mennonite estates in Southern Russia. The largest estate, which belonged to Wilhelm Martens, is said to have covered 30,000 acres. A typical Ekaterinoslav estate owner had an income of over 5,000 rubles per annum; the average salary for a qualified teacher was about 600 rubles per annum; and the average salary for a female Russian peasant was about 40 rubles per annum.

Those who worked on these estates included Russo-Ukrainian peasants and landless Mennonites; in their treatment of laborers (and serfs) the Mennonite landlords were little different from their Russo-Ukrainian peers. A representative incident: a Mennonite farm owner caught a Russo-Ukrainian laborer stealing grain, so he pushed the laborer into the grain bin and locked down the lid, then called the mayor to have the thief flogged. Many Mennonite farmers practiced physical punishment when theft was involved 'the suspect was flogged, so as to teach a lesson to the honest and innocent.'

From the spring of 1918, understandably, Mennonite farmers (though not all individual believers) abandoned pacifism and began to establish an armed force, which they refer to as the Selbstschutz. For those who participated, this resort to violence presented a problem of conscience: Mennonites had – to an extent, at least – renounced the sword; now, men armed themselves to resist Bolshevik-anarchist predations. It is worth observing the logical conclusions that were necessary: 'It was thus argued by Heinrich Janz and Aron Toews, for example, that one must differentiate between the principles of the Kingdom of God and the principles of this worldly kingdom. In matters of the former one must remain nonresistant, of course, but with respect to the latter one is also obligated to support law and order.'

Mennonite memoirists and historians have written extensively about the Selbstschutz; acknowledging the desperate horrors in response to which it emerged. B.J. Dick, for example, worried that those readers of his account 'born decades after those terrible events' would struggle to 'understand fully the Mennonites' situation,' to empathize with their 'anguish', 'and to judge this matter fairly.' The need to form an emergency Selbstschutz,' he states, 'did not arise suddenly overnight but grew gradually through months of unbearable and catastrophic experiences and unprecedented anarchist and Bolshevik terror.'

CHAPTER: The Communist Revolution of 1917

It is imperative that we are clear about chronology. In late 1917, as the Russian Revolution spread to the Ukraine, there was an explosion of long-repressed popular resentment and anger. In some villages, groups of peasants burned estates while shouting 'All this belongs to us! All this belongs to us!'. In Gulyai-Polye, Makhno demanded the local pomeshchiks (Russian landed gentry) produce all the documentation relating to their estates, and then he drafted inventories of everything they owned. Then the anarchist-soviets divided the land so that the pomeshchiks had exactly the same resources as the poor peasants. Doubtless this was a frightening time at which to encounter servants one had previously shamed or beaten, and doubtless these dethroned landed gentry were in many places insulted, beaten and murdered. It is important to note that most of Mennonite deaths in the preliminary report by Mennonite historian Peter Letkemann, entitled 'Mennonite Victims of Revolution, Anarchy, Civil War, Disease and Famine, 1917-1923.' In the months following the revolution, Letkemann identifies nine murders, and these occurred in the far-Eastern Terek settlement, where Mennonites were attacked by 'Muslim mountain tribes'. Then, on 25th January 1918, five members of the Aron Thiessen family were executed in the Schönfeld region; there are good reasons to suspect that the executioners were Makhnovists: first, the Schönfeld region was near to Makhno's home town of Gulyai-Polye; second, it contained some of the most populous estates in the whole region. These estates were not part of the original Mennonite foundations, but were on land purchased in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a region with excellent and productive soil. As we shall see, later in the year, the Mennonites of Schönfeld, supported by Russian gentry, fought the first Selbstschutz Battle of Resistance against Bolsheviks and Anarchists.

What was Nestor Makhno doing during the spring of 1918? In addition to his political work, he was based on a collective farm. His co-workers at this time, he states, included Russian peasants and kulaks who had accepted the redistribution of their land. Makhno's memoir describes the administrative

and political machinations of the Ukrainian Revolution with a detail that suggests veracity. ‘Under the direction of the Revkom,’ he explains, ‘deserter-comrades (ex-soldiers) from the Front began moving all the implements and livestock from the estates of the pomesheiks and large Kulak farms to a central holding area’. The idea was to exact revenge upon the wealthy, and to redistribute material wealth. Landlords and kulak farmers ‘were left with nothing but clothing and crusts of bread.’ Needless to say, this redistribution was not voluntary; in the whole of Russia, the Mennonites known to have been killed during this process of expropriation were the above-mentioned residents of Schönfeld and another five men executed by the Anarchists in Halbstadt, in February 1918.

When Makhno began guerrilla actions against Ukrainian kulaks, Mennonites and Russian gentry, his forces had hostile relations with the former owners of 'requisitioned' properties. While writing his uncompromising biography of Nestor Makhno, Mennonite historian Victor Peters appealed for eyewitnesses among Ukrainian emigrants in North America; a letter to him from Mrs. H. Goerz (nee Neufeld) describes the redistribution of wealth in the Ukraine at this time. Peters writes: ‘One of the first kulaks to “host” Makhno was a Mennonite farmer, Jacob Neufeld, who had a khutor (hamlet) at Ebenfeld, near Gulyai-Polye:

> [Makhno] made every attempt to establish a friendly basis and when Neufeld offered him a key for his room for greater safety, Makhno refused to take it, saying that he felt safe enough among his anarchist friends. When Makhno moved to the next khutor, belonging to another Mennonite by the name of Klassen, Makhno invited Klassen to take his turn, that is, claim some of his possessions for himself, prior to anarchists looting the estate. In fact, the evidence Peters cites against this stage of the anarchist revolution is concerned more with personal score-settling than revolutionary terror; the Makhnovists wore colorful shirts, wide pants, and wide red belts, and all of them were armed to the teeth…’

So, let us be clear about the chronology. The executions of Mennonites occurred between 1917-1923. The Anarchist guerrilla insurgency began in the fall of 1918. According to one historian, ‘Makhno’s initial attacks

against the Austrian army units shifted to include local Mennonite hamlets and villages by mid to late summer, 1918.' The Molotschna Selbstschutz was established as a military force on 23rd April 1918; and by the time of the July 1918 general conference at Lichtenau, armed Mennonites were 'vested with thoughts of resistance and vengeance.'

CHAPTER: Origins of the Mennonite Selbstschutz

The Selbstschutz was formed to defend Mennonites from unprecedented terror, how exactly did it originate? Its initial role was to enable dispossessed farmers to reclaim farm land and material property from those anarchists and Bolsheviks who had collectivized it. B.J. Dick acknowledges that ‘Not always and not in most cases was the conduct of (…) revolutionary militias commendable and inoffensive,’ he describes the occupation as ‘a hell sent by Lucifer’ – the Old Testament Lucifer, presumably. Consider, for example, the testimony of John Xydias, a Russified Greek businessman then resident in Odessa: 'The anarchist reprisal raids were marked by hangings and shootings. Executions dispensed with any sort of proceedings; the venom of the revolutionaries cared not a jot for it, and the leaders gladly washed their hands of any show of a trial. They shot and hanged without any pretense of trial, often not even bothering to check the identity of the ‘defendant.’ The revolutionary had merely to declare that such and such a person had been a 'kulak or landlord' to be summarily executed.' Victims of this revolutionary-repression included women and children, whose houses were burned or 'requisitioned.'

Mennonites acted as guides for punitive missions to find those suspected of confiscating property. Several Mennonite historians acknowledge that the initial aim of the Selbstschutz was to reclaim homes and farms confiscated during the revolution. For example, Loewen and Prieb recount how 'Mennonites armed themselves and together with other estate owners organized militias that attacked and sought to retake estates seized by revolutionary anarchists. Interrogating those they captured, they sought out the leaders, whom were then summarily executed.'

Needless to say, it was the hard-pressed Mennonites who pushed for the Selbstschutz. As B.J. Dick recalls, ‘farmers were generally more in favor of the Selbstschutz than the landless poor.' This was reflected in the initial demographic of the Selbstschutz militia units, which, as John Urry notes, ‘consisted of young Mennonites from farming backgrounds.' The aim of

these militias was to ‘restore the old farming community as completely as possible.' Thus the Selbstschutz started as a defensive organization that aimed to restore hearth and home. As a result the hawks in the Mennonite camp coerced, intimidated, and assaulted those many Anarchist zealots who opposed the Restitution.

When their allies retreated from regions of Ukraine, the Mennonite militias were temporarily without support. Klippenstein mentions a battle fought at Schönfeld, the beleaguered Mennonite settlement northwest of Gulyai-Polye, in which a ‘band of about 120 men of the area along with about fifteen Russian landowners equipped only with small arms was quickly routed.' Survivors of this battle and other refugees retreated to Molotschna, where they described the horror of the anarchist hordes, and amalgamated with the larger Selbstschutz. By this time the Selbstschutz was reliant on a new ally: the White forces led by General Denikin. According to reports, late in 1918, the Selbstschutz went on the offensive: ‘Aided by the White Army, the Molotschna Selbstschutz took the field with a successful attack against Makhnovite militia forces at Chernigovka on 6 December 1918.’

Trained and rearmed by the Whites, the Selbstschutz was a credible fighting force. According to a contemporary Mennonite source, in three months they killed 750 anarchists. Another estimate, provided by a Selbstschutz participant, Gerhard Wiens, claims that in three days of fighting at Blumenthal, the Selbstschutz was responsible for 3000 Makhnovist casualties. Wiens’ estimate is likely exaggerated, but the military importance of the Selbstschutz should not be underestimated. It contained 300 cavalry and 2,700 infantry divided into twenty companies of which seven were non-Mennonite Germans from Prischib. One participant described repeated military successes against the Makhnovists, explaining ‘We had been well-trained by our leader in shooting, bayoneting, the throwing of hand grenades, the quick digging of trenches, etc.’ By January 1919, the Selbstschutz held a front at Blumenthal, twenty miles north of Molotschna. On the other side of their lines, twenty-thousand armed Makhnovists held a 550km front around an anarchist-communist ‘free territory.'

CHAPTER: The Makhnovist Free Territory

While some of their troops were directed against the Petliurists around Aleksandrovsk, the Selbstschutz and Imperial Guardsmen towards the southwest, and General Mai-Maievsky's disintegrating army to the South, increasingly their force was on the east side of the territory, blocking the Denikinist advance. At this time the Makhnovista was a Leninst-Soviet structured volunteer army, though all its enemies, including the 14th Soviet Army, employed conscription. Within the free territory that the Makhnovists defended, there were some fledgling attempts to develop a collectivist revolutionary society: around Gulyai-Polye, factories were collectivized, and previously landless peasants worked large estates as communes. The Makhnovists claimed that 'Freedom of assembly, trade unions and the like is an inalienable right of every worker, and any limitation on this right represents a counter-revolutionary act.' They developed an education system based on the ideas of Francisco Ferrer; classes were organized to promote literacy and to discuss, among other topics, the French Revolution. A May 1919 internal Bolshevik report conceded that Gulyai-Polye was 'one of the stronger cultural centers in New Russia.' They arranged exchanges with collectivized factories and anarchist workers in cities. In Gulyai-Polye on February 12th, the Second Regional Congress was attended by delegates from 350 districts, soviets, unions, and front-line military units. In tragi-comic form, the Second Regional Congress naively expressed its opposition to 'plunder, violence, and anti-Jewish pogroms.'

CHAPTER: The Selbstschutz Defeated

Throughout this period, the Makhnovists' numbers increased as conscripted peasants deserted to them from Mai-Maievsky's army. Makhno had been in treaty with the Leninist-Bolsheviks since January 26th and having repulsed the Denikinists from Gulyai-Polye and stabilized the Southern front, in early March the Makhnovists turned their attention to the West. The Selbstschutz was forced to retreat. Recognising the imminent collapse of the White Army in the south, former Tsarist leaders opportunistically switched allegiances, placing troops under the command of the Bolsheviks. After three weeks, the Bolsheviks disarmed them.

The point is this: Though morally reprehensible, it is not controversial that the Makhnovists killed military officers and all those who voluntarily took up arms against revolution; the question here is how many Mennonites were subjected to atrocities – brutally murdered – and how many were killed for having participated in the counter-revolution? By this time, the execution of prisoners was already the norm rather than the exception.

CHAPTER: The Volunteer Army of General Denikin

By summer 1919, General Denikin commanded 55,500 well-armed troops, including Cossack horsemen whom even Makhno respected. In June they broke the front: the Bolsheviks were routed north of the Don River, and the Makhnovists were crushed near Gulyai-Polye. Trotsky, after briefly promising the ‘liquidation’ of the Makhnovists, decided to abandon the Ukrainian front altogether, withdrawing his troops to near-Central Russia. At this point the Denikinists advanced west, occupying the anarchist 'free territory' and Mennonite farms. It is unclear how many Mennonites enlisted in Denikin’s army, though Klippenstein notes that Mennonite recruits numbered in the low ‘hundreds.' Some were conscripted; some resisted or asked to perform non-combat roles; others joined armed units voluntarily: 'Conscripted or not, a number of Mennonites did respond to Denikin’s call, not only as medics, drivers and sutlers, but as infantrymen as well. Several found assignment in the Dmitrii Donskoi armored train. A diarist of the period, Anna Baerg, noted the capture of Gross Tokmak by “200 Cossacks and 30 Mennonites with two tanks”.' Another formation, the ‘Chortitza Otrjad’, was tasked with defending the railroad between Dnieper and Nikopol: it consisted of 100 Mennonite men supported by White officers. Gerhard Wiens served with a few other Mennonites in Colonel Zagreba’s Kuban Cossack Regiment, a contingent commanded by Colonel Sweringen, General Visentiev’s personal guard, and the Drozdov Division. John Kühn recalled that among General Wrangel’s army ‘were many young Mennonite men.'

In so far as the Denikinists had a political program it was based on the restoration of the Monarchy and the establishment of a single Russian state incorporating the Ukraine. This brought them into conflict with the local population, and even one of their own commanders, General Wrangel, described ‘pillage and speculation, the debauchery, gambling, orgies of looting, violence and arbitrary acts by former Tsarist officers. Otherwise sympathetic chroniclers are scathing about the White’s abuses in the Ukraine: Richard Luckett describes ‘Something near to anarchy,’

bemoaning the ‘casual brutalities of the Cossacks,’ the regular pogroms, and other ‘appalling acts of barbarism.' They issued proclamations encouraging Russo-Ukrainians to rise up against the ‘Jew-communists’ and were responsible for hundreds of pogroms and the murder of thousands of Jews. ‘Many of their victims were beaten, mutilated, raped, hanged, burned, dumped into wells or thrown from rooftops, and buried alive. Arshinov states that in the Free Territory, ‘Peasants were plundered, violently abused, and murdered (…) Almost all the Christian and Jewish women of [Gulyai-Polye] were raped.

A member of Denikin’s Special Council, N.I. Astrov, stated that the main features of the Denikin regime were ‘Violence, torture, robberies, drunkenness, odious behavior.' The counterintelligence service ‘carried its activities to an unlimited wild arbitrariness,’ creating, as Denikin put it, ‘a painful mania, all over the country.' According to General Wrangel, at this time the White Army hunted down anybody suspected of any contact with opposition groups, even if that contact had been involuntary – a policy that he denounced as ‘insane and cruel.' They especially victimized the wives and girlfriends of known insurgents: according to diaries attributed to Makhno’s lover, Galina Kuzmenko, in summer 1919 the Denikinists’ victims included the wife of Makhno’s elder brother, Savva: ‘they beat her, stabbed her with their bayonets, cut off one of her breasts and only then did they shoot her.' Since all combatants in this civil war were killed without trial or record, it is impossible to quantify the executions and murders committed by all factions, but their victims certainly numbered in the tens of thousands.

CHAPTER: The Battle of Peregonovka

During this time the Makhnovists retreated west. As they retreated, they fought battles with the pursuing Denikinists, as well as against the Bolshevik Fourteenth Army, which was escaping the British naval bombardment of Odessa. They also achieved the execution of the pogromist warlord Grigorev; significantly, many of Grigoriev's notoriously undisciplined troops were at this time incorporated into the depleted Makhnovist army. By September, the Makhnovists were 600km from Gulyai-Polye, near Uman. Exhausted, lacking supplies, and burdened by eight-thousand sick and wounded, they found themselves surrounded by Denikinists and Petliurists. At this point, Makhno counter-attacked. First, he agreed to a truce with the Petliurists: whatever Petliura's opinion of anarchists, the Makhnovists were all that stood between him and Denikin's Cossacks. Thus, Makhno could persuade Petliura to shelter his eight-thousand invalids. With this sorted, Makhno gave his army the greatest pep talk ever. The entire long retreat, he claimed, had been nothing but a tactic to over-extend Denikin's forces, and now, hundreds of miles to the west of their homes, they had outwitted the enemy. When he had finished his speech, he turned his exhausted men to face the Denikinists, and with a cry of 'Victory or Death', he and his troops attacked the center of Denikin's position (this account is largely from Arshinov).

Denikin's First Officers' Regiment of Simferopol began to retreat. And then they just ran. Contagious panic seized Denikin's forces, and in the ensuing rout hundreds were ruthlessly slaughtered on the banks of the Sinyukha River – Voline and Arshinov describe corpses strewn for miles. While Makhno claimed 'complete annihilation' – Denikin's sources suggest they lost 637 men – this was a decisive moment in the civil war. The Denikinist officer Sakovitch understood this: 'In a sky blanketed in autumn cloud, the last puffs of artillery smoke exploded then... all was silent. All of us ranking officers sensed that something tragic had just occurred though nobody could have had any inkling of the enormity of the disaster which had struck. None of us knew that at that precise moment nationalist Russia had lost the war.

"It’s over," I said, I know not why, to Lieutenant Rozov who was standing alongside me. "It’s over," he confirmed sombrely.'

The Makhnovists traveled east covering 660km in eleven days. In town after town they destroyed regiments that knew nothing of the White’s defeat at Peregonovka and were unprepared for battle. As Denikin himself recalled: ‘Makhno’s bands, sometimes numbering as many as thirty thousand men, roved far behind in the vast territory between the Dnieper and the Sea of Azov, disorganizing our rear and on one occasion even threatening Taganrog, the seat of G.H.Q.’ Denikin had to withdraw troops from the northern front, effectively halting the march on Moscow; the Makhnovist revolt ‘had the effect of disorganizing our rear and weakening our front at the most critical period of its existence.' It was on this basis that Max Nomad labeled Makhno ‘the bandit who saved Moscow.'

CHAPTER: Revenge of the Revolution

The Makhnovist advance may have changed the course of the Bolshevik revolution, but for those who had welcomed and supported Denikin, it brought sudden and unanticipated terror. In the Makhnovist blitzkrieg, all 'known to be active enemies of the peasants and workers were condemned to death. Pomeshchiks kulaks perished in great numbers', and the uncontested testimony of the peasantry was sufficient evidence on which to execute a kulak as an 'active' enemy. In every town the Makhnovists captured they also executed enemy soldiers, police, mayors, and Orthodox priests. In every town, they also recruited new soldiers, many of whom could have known little about the Makhnovist movement. In several instances, they incorporated into the Makhnovtchina independent militias and forces led by Petliurist atamans – some of whom were subsequently executed for pogroms and banditry. Then they rode on, their anger further fueled by the evidence of the Denikinists' rampage.

The massacres of Mennonites at the end of 1919 can be understood as part of the Makhnovists' revolutionary violence. Many dozens of Mennonites were executed in the Yazykovo-Chortitza region: four males were killed at Adelsheim; eleven males at Franzfeld; ten males and one woman at Neuendorf; seven males at Burwalde; one male at Kronstal; six males and one woman at Neuenberg; and three males at Osterwick. However, the village that suffered most was Eichenfeld: one month after the Battle of Peregonovka, on October 26th, Makhnovist Kontrrazvedki (counter-intelligence secret police agents) and villagers killed eighty-three men, women and children out of a population of just over three hundred.

Sean Patterson is perhaps unique in having pursued a scholarly study of these events using Makhnovist as well as Mennonite histories, and I am indebted to him for having shared his forthcoming research. According to Patterson, Eichenfeld was singled out because of the success of its small but robust Selbstschutz. The leaders of the Eichenfeld Selbstschutz were a wonderfully named local man, Heinrich Heinrich Heinrichs, and a former

soldier, Peter Von Kampen. Under their leadership, ‘the Eichenfeld group gained a measure of notoriety,’ writes Patterson, ‘successfully repelling Anarchist and bandit attacks throughout the spring of 1919. In one incident the Selbstschutz feigned an arms turnover to local anarchist-bandits. At the arranged spot of exchange the Mennonites turned their guns on the occupiers forcing a retreat. A number of prisoners were fairly tried and executed.’ In response to this, Soviet troops occupied the Yazykovo-Chortitza region and demanded the surrender of all weapons. Although the majority of armed Mennonites acquiesced, the Eichenfeld Selbstschutz kept their weapons. According to Patterson’s source, in July 1919 fourteen Eichenfeld Selbstschutz men defeated 300 Red Army troops. In an attempt to control the region, the Bolsheviks established a village Soviet led by Commissar Snissarenko, but after their identities were exposed to the Soviet by Daniel Hiebert, a traitorous Selbstschutz man, Heinrichs’ militia decided to liquidate the Soviet. According to a participant, Kornelius Heinrichs, “the group decided to clean up these men. Heinrich Heinrichs was the leader – they decided they would kill everybody, take no prisoners and not one person would utter a word." Even before the region was conquered by the Denikinists, the Soviet leaders Hiebert, Snissarenko, and one other had been executed. So when the Makhnovists recaptured the region, the Eichenfeld executions were ‘a warning to Mennonites throughout the region that Makhno would not tolerate resistance.' The Makhnovists’ first target was the leader of the Selbstschutz, Heinrich Heinrich Heinrichs, but, according to Patterson, the man they killed was actually Heinrich Heinrich’s father, Heinrichs senior. They then executed all farmers and all their adult sons. The dead also included five traveling tent missionaries (preachers unpopular with the Russo-Ukrainian peasantry), who were led to a storage shed and upon entering ‘were killed by a swift sword or sabre blow to the back of the neck.' The manner of these executions suggests the work of the Kontrrazvedka, Makhno’s feared secret police counter-intelligence service.

Further south, there were similar executions in Molotschna: twenty males were killed at Blumenort; eleven males at Altonau; six males at Ohrloff; one male in Tiege. The executions were triggered by the assassination of four Makhnovists who had been attempting to kidnap Jacob Epp. Klippenstein explains, with detail suggestive of accuracy, that those who killed the Makhnovists had in fact come from outside Blumenort: he describes a band

of twenty-two Mennonites and White soldiers led by an officer named Gloecker. However, when the Makhnovists arrived to investigate, a Russo-Ukrainian woman denounced Epp, who was then executed along with fourteen men believed to have been his co-conspirators. The dead included at least one strict pacifist, a teacher called Schmidt. Again, these executions seem typical of the hasty retributive violence then being practiced by the Makhnovist forces in general and by the Kontrrazvedka in particular.

CHAPTER: Six weeks of Anarchy

While these executions were taking place, Soviet delegates from local villages and factories were meeting in Aleksandrovsk, at the Makhnovist-organised Regional Congress of Workers and Peasants. In Voline's fascinating account of this congress, he mentions that a delegate reported 'arbitrary and uncontrolled' actions by the Makhnovist Kontrrazvedka. Contrary to their image as rampaging bandits, the Makhnovist movement took uncorroborated civilian complaints seriously. For example, a few weeks later in Ekaterinoslav, a student from the Mining Institute was among those delegated to approach Makhno to complain about the flogging of an intellectual alleged to have been a Denikinist spy. The student recalled approaching Makhno's office with trepidation and being surprised at Makhno's friendly and attentive audience: after explaining that no Makhnovist should ever use the lash, for his army either shot people or released them unharmed, Makhno promised to look into the matter personally. In this discussion he also confessed the difficulties he experienced in preventing abuses by those who professed allegiance to his command. Similarly, the report of Kontrrazvedka abuses led the Aleksandrovsk congress to pass resolution number three, establishing an investigative committee chaired by Voline.

There are two sides to the few weeks of anarchy that followed the Battle of Peregonovka. On one hand, the Makhnovists held to their uncertain principles with an almost naïve disregard for the impermanence of their revolution. A draft declaration of their Military Revolutionary Soviet, adopted on 20th October 1919, insisted on soviets from below and demanded the total independence of all peasant and worker soviets. On the issue of civil liberties, the document advocated 'freedom of speech, of assembly, of union, of organization, etc.' Ekaterinoslav, with a population of 190,000, was the largest city the Makhnovists ever controlled. When the White Army recaptured Ekaterinoslav, their investigative organs identified at least seventy victims murdered by the 'extra-judicial organs' of the Makhnovists. Even under the bombardments of Denikinist shells, to the

Makhnovists in Ekaterinoslav it was a point of principle that all those who outwardly supported the local soviets were permitted to publish their newspapers. Thus, during these weeks, more than half-a-dozen soviet organizations were represented in print, including the Bolsheviks, whose Zvesda was fiercely critical of the Makhnovists.

We have seen the extent of reprisals in some outlying villages, and how arbitrarily the Kontrrazvedka identified the ‘active’ enemies of the revolution. Even Makhno, who was clearly no pacifist, admitted that the activities of the Kontrrazvedka under his command caused him ‘mental anguish and embarrassment' when he had to apologize for their excesses.

CHAPTER: Wild Savagery

One month after the Eichenfeld executions, a second wave of killings occurred over an eight-day period, to the West of the Dnieper. Less has been written about these slaughters, but they account for a quarter of all violent deaths suffered by Russian Mennonites in the years 1917-1923. Between November 29th and December 2nd, a series of attacks on villages in the Zagradovka region killed around 200 people. Then, a few days later, there was a prolonged gun battle at the tiny village of Ebenfeld, around 100km north of Zagradovka. This village and the neighboring village of Steinbach were by December 7th annihilated. Around 100 people were murdered in attacks of an exceptionally brutal and indiscriminate nature. In these incidents, the manner of attack and the selection of victims appears consistent with the usual pattern of Makhnovist violence: in Muensterberg, which was a poverty-stricken settlement, there seems to have been no attempt to target only adult males, and the attacks were characterized by a cruelty that could in no way have contributed to a military or political goal. It is, of course, a problematic to think that Nestor Makhno rode into Muensterberg and personally ‘beheaded a whole family and set all the heads on display tables’; even if we think him morally capable of such an act, he was at the time 200km away in Ekaterinoslav, where, in one of the Civil War’s stranger incidents, Lenin's Chekist agents were plotting to assassinate him with strychnine-poisoned cognac. One rare account of the Steinbach and Ebenfeld massacres was produced by Abram Enns. Enns narrates events with a strange omniscience – he describes with certain detail events that he could not possibly have witnessed – but while his account must be treated with suspicion, it is rare in that it identifies the perpetrators by name: according to Enns, the massacres were the work of 92 men under the leadership of Alexander Grigorev, a Cossack from Orenburg. He also mentions an ‘executioner’: a man from Nikopol called Ivan Schwajko. These men are at present unknown to me.

But even if we could place a particular unit of Makhnovists or renegade Petliurists or other independent bandits at the scene of these crimes, the

matter would not be resolved. In many incidents of violence against Mennonites, there is evidence of widespread participation by the victims' Ukrainian neighbors. Deirdrich Neufeld, a Mennonite eyewitness, whose father and two brothers were killed in the Zagradovka attacks, 'suggested that the Muensterberg attack had been especially brutal because of the general resistance of the Mennonites to land expropriation, and the particular arrangements which had finally been worked out for the area'. By the end of 1919, years of oppression and the hardships and tragedies of civil war had engendered hatreds that were local and personal as much as ideological. It is necessary, as Arno Mayer argues, to distinguish between 'wild' and 'intentional' savagery. 'By nature without rules of engagement and retaliation, civil war is a cauldron of wanton unpremeditated and premeditated violence. There is also the calculated and coordinated violence which is ideologically driven and centrally directed.'

CHAPTER: Myths of Revolutionary Chivalry

There is little prospect of imminent rapprochement between Mennonite and Makhnovist histories of the Russian Civil War. Makhnovist historians will need to abandon the fairy tale of unfailingly firm-but-fair revolutionary chivalry and acknowledge the undeserved violence endured by Mennonites. Quite simply, it is beyond the realms of possibility that an army of this size in this situation could have avoided committing abuses and atrocities. In October 1918, Makhno commanded about 150 men; one year later, his forty thousand soldiers briefly conquered a region the size of England in which lived more than seven million people. Onbe historian calculates that Makhno 'could easily muster 60,000.' Many of these soldiers joined the Makhnovists having previously fought in other armies, including those of Tsar Nicholas II, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's Red Army, General Mai-Maievsky, and Nikifor Grigoriev. They came from the poorest classes of Russian society and were not exempt from the effects of poverty. They carried diseases and the burden of alcoholism: some of them had survived the Great War drinking anti-freeze. They had received little education and many had been beaten by their employers since childhood. Their numbers included bullies and rapists and men desensitized to violence, but also heroic women, soviet delegates, peasant boys who woke screaming in the night, who wouldn’t have needlessly hurt even their horses. They witnessed unimaginable horrors and carried with them their traumas and madnesses and nightmares. They were often hungry and raggedly clothed. They slept in their clothes on beds of straw or dirt. In the eyes of some of their neighbors, they were 'dirty', 'rough', 'gruesome', 'coarse', 'dissolute', 'bestial,' 'vile', ‘stinking,’ ‘disgusting’, ‘filthy scum.’ When they fell sick with typhus and were left behind, their enemies dragged them from hospitals and hung them from trees. They had fathers who’d been shot and sisters who’d been raped. Most of them would be dead within a year. They wanted a share of the wealth they helped to produce. They promised war to the Russian gentry and peace to the cottagers. They raised the flag of freedom in the heart of darkness; those who wish to honor their memory should address their failures as well as their successes.

The Mennonites, too, were a mix of characters. They were landowners. They were landless peasants who fought anarchism and revolution. They were estate managers who whipped thieves but adored their sons. They were women who had the generosity of spirit to nurse those sick and dying Makhnovists who expropriated their homes. They were bullies and thugs. They were pious Christians who resisted all military service. They were militia men who wept in church and begged forgiveness for the lives they'd taken. They were girls who lived in fear of rape. They were young adventurers who loved the smell and feel of guns. They were victims buried in mass graves. They were poor farmers in isolated villages caught in a war they didn't understand. They were proud patriarchs. They were soldiers who killed for the counter-revolution. They were pacifists. If there's to be any rapprochement between Makhnovist and Mennonite histories, both will need to abandon the myth of the their community's special martyrdom. The Mennonites' Civil War losses were in percentage terms far lower than those of the Russian population as a whole, and Mennonites were no less likely to deploy violence than members of any other ethnic group. It is a historical fact that many more Mennonites took up arms against the revolution than joined it.

CHAPTER: The End of Hostilities

One further question deserves our attention: why did the mass executions of Mennonites stop in December 1919? The immediate answer is that they stopped because the Makhnovist Army was plagued with typhus and scattered by Bolshevik and Denikinist counter-offensives. But Makhno's troops regrouped and throughout 1920 and into 1921, the Makhnovists continued to field over 10,000 men. They roamed the Ukraine, eluding the Bolsheviks, and in the Crimea they destroyed General Wrangel's military campaign just as they had destroyed General Denikin's. Their military exploits became legend, and they remained an important enough force that in 1920 the British attempted, unsuccessfully, to negotiate an anti-Bolshevik alliance. But despite regularly passing through Mennonite settlements, there was no repetition of 1919's large scale killings. Why?

In part, the Makhnovist Army may have been more disciplined and politically committed than in 1919 when their numbers were swelled by partisans recruited during the long retreat west. But the main reason is surely that in 1920 and 1921 the foremost enemy of the Ukrainian peasantry was the Bolshevik government, and the Mennonite community was not politically and militarily involved with the Bolsheviks as it had been with the Denikinists. According to Viktor Belash, in the spring of 1921, 'the insurgents were helped by the heretofore hostile Mennonites. Embittered by the repressions of Soviet power, they allowed the Makhnovist underground to make use of their villages and carried out reconnaissance themselves, informing the Shtarm [staff of the Makhnovist army] about the movements of Red Army forces.'

CHAPTER: The Bolshevik Victory

From this point on, the situation deteriorated for both the Makhnovists and the Mennonites. Unable to end the Makhnovist revolt, the Bolsheviks initiated a premeditated and systematic terror, executing all Makhnovist sympathizers and the families of suspected partisans. It is impossible to know the numbers of Ukrainians who at this time were executed or deported to Siberia: Arshinov described 200,000 'shot or seriously injured,' with an equivalent number deported, as a modest estimate. Arshinov's figures are probably too high, but the relentless executions of Makhnovist partisans, sympathizers, and their relatives reduced the movement to a scattering of displaced guerrillas. A few fled towards the Kuban. Others hoped to disappear amidst the population of Kiev. But most were killed. Makhno himself was shot through the thigh and appendix. Then a bullet entered his nape and came out through his cheek. On 28th August 1921, he fled into Romania with eighty-three remaining partisans.

As the Bolsheviks consolidated their power, the suffering in the Ukraine continued. While some Mennonites escaped to Canada, others remained to face the horrors of the Holodomor: killing by hunger. In the mass famine that killed five-million Ukrainians, the Mennonites' suffering was alleviated by relief supplied by their émigré brethren and other international Mennonite communities and in turn some generously shared this food with their starving Ukrainian neighbors). But other ravages of the Soviet State were inescapable: ten-thousand Mennonites entered the Gulag system or were executed, another ten thousand were forced into exile, mainly to Kazakhstan.

Throughout these dark years, a few Makhnovists dreamed of reigniting the revolution, but the insurgents' success had always been based on regional support and familiarity with the local terrain. Makhno and other surviving former Makhnovists struggled with life in their Paris exile. A few survived to fight in the Spanish Civil War – but Makhno never recovered from his injuries, and in 1934, at the age of forty-four, he died in Paris. In his last

days, he frequented the Vincennes racetrack: some say he went there to drink and gamble; others maintain it just lifted his heart to see the horses run.

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Notes

1) Before we begin, I owe you a note on terminology: when transliterating Ukrainian and Russian names into the Roman alphabet I have tried to use consistent spellings (usually the variation I happen to have encountered first) and have changed some spellings in quotations without notification. By ‘Mennonites’ I refer to the ethnic group rather than to those who practiced that religion. When differentiating the native population from Mennonites I have designated them ‘Russo-Ukrainians’, for our action is set where today is Ukraine, where before was Russia, and where in 1919 was neither of the above.

2) For much of the twentieth-century, the Makhnovists were slurred as an anti-Semitic organization; in fact, Jews were prominent in the Makhnovtchina, as they tended to be in all Ukrainian anarchist groups, and opposition to anti-Semitism was one of the Makhnovists’ strongest principles: despite having a shortage of armaments, Makhno made a point of arming Jewish self-defense groups. Recently, Jewish historian Arno Mayer, Professor emeritus of Princeton University, has written that ‘among the Greens – and Ukrainian nationalists – Makhno stands out for having stood against the torment and victimization of Jews.' The evidence on this question has been established since the 1920s, but it has often been smothered by Stalinist propaganda (Yaroslav’s History of Anarchism in Russia, for example) and fiction (Joseph Kessel’s Makhno et sa Juive, for example). The Jewish scholar Elias Tcherikover, who headed the historical section of YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute), exhaustively researched anti-Semitic atrocities in the Ukraine: 'It is undeniable that, of all these armies, including the Red Army, the Makhnovists behaved best in regard to the non-Mennonites civilian population in general and the Jewish population in particular. I have numerous testimonies to this. The proportion of justified complaints against the Makhnovist Army by comparison with the others is negligible. (…) Do not let us speak of pogroms alleged to have been organized by Makhno himself. This is a slander or an error. Nothing of the sort occurred.' This is not to say that no pogroms occurred in areas where

the Makhnovists operated – Makhno's memoirs reveal his wariness of, and struggle to control, the anti-Semitism endemic throughout the Ukraine.

3) I have taken the difficult decision to avoid discussing the rape of Mennonite women in this essay. In my opinion, to discuss this usefully one would need to be in possession of more information than I have. That it happened is certain, but it is impossible to say to what extent and at what times and in which places. Both Mennonite and Makhnovist histories are unreliable with regard to this subject. The Makhnovist memoirists have an obvious interest in defending the reputation of their army (though Voline's comments on rape have provoked much discussion); meanwhile, Mennonite memoirists have cited the rape of village women to justify their resort to violence. A quote that appears in various forms in various records recalls 'someone' or 'many men' or 'some men' explaining that they wouldn't fight over property but would take up arms to defend their wives and daughters. For example, Bernhard Dick recalled 'Quite often we heard men saying: "To rob my possessions is one thing – but they won't touch my wife or my daughter. Then I'll grab the ax I keep handy for that purpose". These comments are supposed to have been made in 1919: Mennonite eyewitness B.B. Janz claimed that in Molotschna the Makhnovists had 'stopped short of murder and rape' up until four of their soldiers were killed by a White Army unit in November 1919.

Finally, a serious discussion of rape in the Civil War would necessitate confronting the sexual violence endemic across Russia at this time; it would need to consider cultures of male entitlement evident in the Komsomol and other Leninist-Marxist groups; attendant ideas that saw female sexuality as a resource to be shared like any other; it would need to consider the incorporation of female prostitution into a black economy, as another item to be bartered for goods and services; etc. As one historian puts it 'women were obliged to give themselves to get past Chekist checkpoints or to secure passage on a train, or to obtain a morsel of food. In view of this situation, there was a terrible upsurge in venereal diseases and rampant demoralization among the female population.' A study of sexual politics, sexual violence, and women's participation as combatants and non-combatants in the Makhnovtschina would be welcome, but will not be attempted here. However, one incident that may be illustrative was

recounted by Isaak Teper, who spent some months with the movement: when the Makhnovist commander Puzanov was found guilty of raping a nurse, Makhno wanted to shoot him on the spot but was defeated by a majority vote of the soviet tribunal. Puzanov's only punishment was to be relieved of his command.

4) This quote is from an anti-Semitic autobiography by a neo-Nazi, Russian Mennonite émigré called Ben Klassen. Surprisingly, the book has failed to find a major publisher, despite explaining how the Jews are to blame for everything, and promising such exciting chapters as 'Hawaiian Holiday.'

5) In Helmet Huebert's version, the heads of children were on chairs and also on windowsills 'as if they were flower pots.'

6) A crude outline of the warring factions gives some sense of the general anarchy. Following the October Revolution in Russia, the newly formed Ukrainian People's Republic declared independence from Russia and the newly-formed West Ukrainian People's Republic declared independence from Austro-Hungary and Poland. By mid-1919 Poland had occupied the whole West Ukrainian People's Republic; but we won't focus on the horror germinating in Western Ukraine as it was on the opposite side of the country from the Mennonites and Makhnovists. Similarly, we shall ignore the Komancza Republic, which wanted to join with the West Ukrainian People's Republic, and the Russophile Lempko Republic, which wanted to join with the autonomous province of Carpathian Ruthenia. (All these territories appear to have existed for the sole purpose of exciting future generations of stamp collectors.)

The Bolsheviks, meanwhile, initially forced out of Kiev, established the north-eastern border town of Kharkov as the administrative capital of their Socialist Soviet Republic. But soon they were marching on the capital, pushing the Ukrainian Nationalist forces south. Unable to stall the Bolshevik advance, the Ukrainian Nationalists concluded a treaty with the Central Powers (i.e., Germany, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires), who sent troops into the Ukraine and forced the Bolsheviks across the Russian border. The Austro-Germans et al installed a puppet government led by Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky, whose regime restored feudal property rights and whipped, shot, or hung peasants

suspected of rebellion. After the Allied victory in WWI, the power base of Skoropadsky's Austro-German-backed regime disintegrated, and it was replaced by a new version of the Ukrainian People's Republic, soon led by the Ukrainian Nationalist Symon Petliura (hence 'Petliurists'). The new regime faced an aggressive Romania and an invading Poland, while the French seized Odessa and General Mai-Maievsky's Don Cossack and Chechen White Army pushed north from the Crimea. At the same time, Petliura's disillusioned peasant soldiers were deserting to independent militias or just going home. Then, in December 1918, the Bolsheviks re-invaded from Kursk, while General Denikin's force consolidated its base in the Kuban, preparing to march on Kiev and Moscow.

7) Often fiercely anti-Semitic, some of these independent warlords had armies big enough to threaten the capital. For example, 'Hetman Klimenko, who had a considerable following in the district between Uman and Kiev, led an attack on the Ukrainian capital in which local citizens joined his partisans in thundering "Death to the Jews! For the Orthodox Faith!".' The most notorious of all these warlords was Nikifor Grigoriev, whom the Makhnovists eventually executed.

His 23,000 soldiers controlled a territory to the East of Uman. Like Makhno he was renowned for his bravery and adept at partisan warfare, but he had no political direction, fighting first with the Petliurists, and then with the Bolsheviks, before he became vehemently anti-Semitic and prepared to side with Denikin. In May 1919 he launched a pogrom in Elisavetgrad, recounted here by Arno Mayer: '[S]ome 400 Jews were murdered, and hundreds were injured. Many of the dying victims were abused, defiled and mutilated. Hereafter, and through July, there were scores of minor pogroms not only in nearby provinces where Grigoriev had considerable sway, but beyond as well. It was at this point that Grigoriev had his fatal encounter with Nestor Makhno.'

8) In Mennonite histories there is a tendency to attribute all perceived crimes to 'the bandits' and to equate all bandits with the Makhnovist 'anarchist hordes'. For example, Bernhard Dick recalls that after the Whites were forced from the area in the spring of 1919, Mennonite representatives visited the Bolsheviks to explain they had no wish to oppose the

government and sought only to defend themselves against bandits. Meanwhile, ‘The bandits, rough, gruesome fellows, now flooded our villages and furiously robbed, killed, and raped, for their leaders had given them three days' leave for that purpose.' The original source attributes it to General Pavel Dybenko. Due to the temporary alliances then in place, Dybenko at that time commanded forces from the armies of Lenin, Makhno, and Grigoriev. Dybenko was an old Bolshevik who later led the suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion.

9) As Richard Stites notes in his excellent monograph on Russian popular culture: 'The cultural fate of Makhno was ironic, since if any epic ever deserved romanticized and sympathetic treatment in fiction and cinema, it was that of his Ukrainian insurgent horse army that outwitted both Reds and Whites for a couple of years before being subdued. Their story is closer to the legends of Stenka Razin and other folk rebels than anything in the Bolshevik hagiography, including Chapaev. But since the Bolsheviks feared having the Makhnovists treated as underdogs, they enshrined them for decades as sadistic and degenerate bandits.'

10) When confronting the Makhnovist movement, writers too often accept or dismiss evidence according to the requirements of their argument. Felix Schnell, for example, writes like a man who has a theory and is determined to fit it to his subject. He presents the argument that 'Even if some stories are simply fairy tales they nevertheless give an image of the Batko that suggest the behavior and actions of the real Nestor Makhno.' This argument is inadequate because there are, of course, opposing 'fairy tales,' and, like too many others, Schnell simply ignores the stories that don't concur with his argument (e.g., he cites one unpublished manuscript to support his claim that 'inhabitants of Ekaterinoslav lived through a six week nightmare' and doesn't mention any of the extensive contrary evidence).

11) I write ‘executed’ though the source says ‘brutally murdered.’ All Mennonites who were killed during the Civil War, even those who are known to have killed multiple people (e.g., Abram Loewen) are described by Mennonite historians as having been ‘brutally murdered’; in contrast, ‘bandits,’ of course, are always ‘executed.’ Similarly, ‘bandits’ ‘loot’, ‘rob’,

and ‘plunder’; whereas ‘groups from several Mennonite villages attacked Chernigovka to requisition a good deal food and other goods.'

12) Makhno had many talents but a flair for narrative was not one of them. Oddly, however, the procedural, often pedantic (sometimes irate) tone of his memoirs makes them more illuminating than many other accounts. Who else would feel compelled to note that, later, in the first days of the Insurgent Army, an advance was held up because nobody knew in which box were packed the panoramic sights for the cannon?

13) It’s often stated that Makhno had a personal grudge against Mennonites because as a child he was treated cruelly by employers of that sect. In fact, there’s nothing in his writings or the memoires of his acquaintances to suggest he had any particular interest in Mennonites as an ethnic group. If anyone had a grudge, perhaps it was Fedor Schuss: according to a former Makhnovist, Aleksei Chubenko, during the early fighting at the end of 1918, Makhno arrested Schuss and threatened to shoot him for cruel treatment of Mennonite settlers.

14) Peters’ book Nestor Makhno: The Life of an Anarchist deserves mention for it promises much and delivers little. The book is one-sided (according to one story, related to me by Sean Patterson, when Peters was presenting his book at the University of Manitoba in the 1970s, he was confronted by an angry Orthodox priest who had previously fought in the Makhnovist army), but the list of sources to which he had access is exciting. According to his preface, Peters received responses from dozens of correspondents, who represented all sides of the debate, but disappointingly little of this material is referred to in the book. Instead, Peters mainly bases his story on the previously published accounts of Makhno’s political friends (Arshinov and Voline) and enemies (the Bolshevik agent Gerassimenko, the misinformed novelist Joesph Kessel, and, especially, the pro-Petliura Ukrainian Nationalist Meleshko). The heart of the book is a seven-page account by Mr. H.B. Wiens, a former inhabitant of the Mennonite settlement of Schönfeld.

Wiens describes his experiences in the winter of 1918/19, while the settlement was occupied by the Makhnovist Simeon Pravda. Pravda was a former beggar who had lost both his legs in an industrial accident. Possibly

a morphine addict, he sounds from Wiens account to have been a violent, damaged, and unstable individual. Wiens recalls being invited to join Pravda in drinking bouts but then on another occasion being severely beaten on Pravda's orders. Peters says that Wiens' account goes on to describe a visit by Makhno, with whom Wiens was invited to have tea, but Peters doesn't share this episode with the reader (a rather strange decision given his book is, ostensibly, a biography of Makhno not Pravda). With this exception, however, the eyewitness evidence mentioned in the preface is mostly absent from the text or referred to inadequately. For example, Peters mentions in the preface that, for some unstated reason, he was 'unable to use' a manuscript sent to him by a Reverend N. Pliczowski, and mentions only that 'it was a defense of Fedor Schuss (and Makhno).' Another potentially interesting source, pseudonymized as Mr. Ivan Topolye at the correspondent's request, was an army deserter who for a time became a Makhnovist partisan; Topolye does make the main text of the book, but this interesting material is rendered historically useless by the manner in which it's presented: only in a footnote do we learn that this first person account is in fact a 'story (…) based on fifteen pages of notes by the author.' Given the arbitrariness of Peters' methodology, it's perhaps appropriate that the book ends with a lengthy description of a prose fiction by a writer called Oless Gonchar. However, I am defeated as to why Peters thought this literary synopsis more deserving of space than the testimonies of those who had taken the time to contact him. Fortunately, at least some of Peters' research and correspondence has been deposited at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in Massachusetts; those able to visit the Institute may, perhaps, find more enlightenment in the memories of those who witnessed the Makhnovists' violence and revolution, than they will find in a fictional story about Makhno wanting to drink from 'the elixir of life.'

15) The force sent to kill Makhno and his comrades numbered 500 men, or 680 men, or a thousand men – basically, a lot of men however one counted them. This punishment battalion – which was defeated by sixty peasants – was comprised of Austrian troops, state police, Russo-Ukrainian landlords, and German colonists. As revenge for their defeat, these concerned agents of law and order allegedly burned 500 houses in Dibrivka.

16) The Schönfeld militia was led by Gerhard Toews, who had been a lieutenant in the Tsarist army. He survived this battle and later fought for the Whites.

17) In Chortitza, at least, the Selbstschutz conscripted all males aged twenty to thirty-five. In October 1919, the Makhnovists introduced the policy of conscription referred to as ‘voluntary mobilization,’ which, however one interprets it, squashed the army’s previous commitment to volunteerism.

18) In theory, the press was free so long as it wasn’t used to agitate for an authority that would challenge the workers and peasants soviets. However, after a Bolshevik newspaper called-out the Makhnovists in successive issues, Anarchists complained to the editor, and then, since their censorious protests were unheeded, they smashed the plates of the printing presses.

19) Britain backed Denikin’s troops with 250,000 rifles, twelve tanks, 1,685,522 artillery shells, 160 million rounds of ammunition, and about 100 airplanes.'

20) Militarily, the Petliurists weren’t great: when Denikin captured Kiev, the only casualties were an over-turned ice cream cart and a plaster statue that lost one ear. Their record of atrocities, however, was appalling. Today, when Ukrainian nationalism has re-emerged as a dominant cultural force, there is discomfort or denial regarding the catalogue of pogroms perpetrated by Ukrainian Nationalists during Petliura’s rule (and during the Second World War).

A number of historians have claimed that Petliura and his government attempted to stop the pogroms and were not themselves anti-Semitic, but this defense arrived too late for Petliura: in 1926, while in exile in Paris, Petliura was assassinated by Samuel Schwarzbard, a Jewish Ukrainian anarchist comrade of Nestor Makhno. At a sensational trial, Schwarzbard pleaded just cause, and was eventually acquitted.

Bulgarian anarchist Kiro Radeff claimed that Makhno had defended Petliura against the charge of anti-Semitism and had attempted to dissuade Schwarzbard on the eve of the attack.

21) According to Le Temps correspondent Pierre Berland: 'There is no doubt that Denikin's defeat is explained more by the uprisings of the peasants who brandished Makhno's black flag, than by the success of Trotsky's regular army. The partisan bands of "Batko" tipped the scales in favor of the Reds and if Moscow wants to forget it today, impartial history will not.'

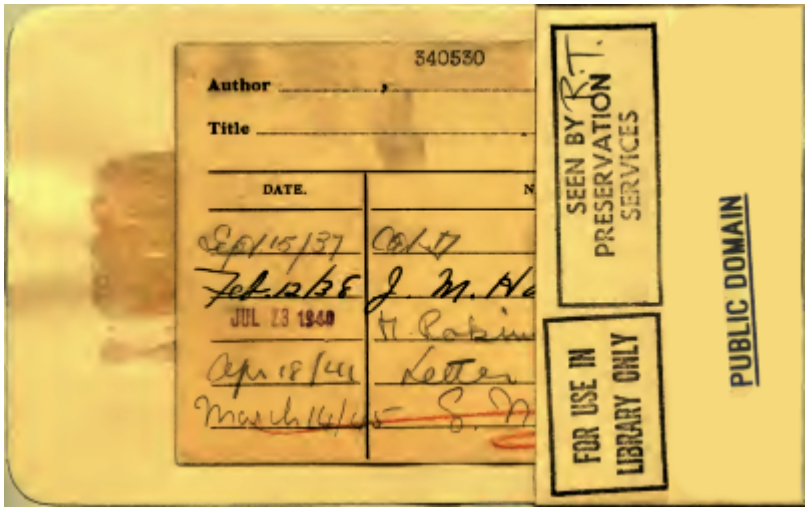
22) According to Patterson, Heinrichs junior fought for Denikin and later emigrated to New York.

23) The details of the incident vary slightly with each telling. Toews states that Abram Berg's account is 'unique insofar as it establishes Makhno's personal presence in Blumenort', but Berg was seven in 1919, and he wrote his account more than half-a-century later, and Makhno was more likely 200km north in Ekaterinoslav.

24) Once again, I am grateful to Sean Patterson for bringing this source to my attention.

25) The human cost of the Civil War was perhaps seven to ten million lives, which is to say approximately six to eight percent of the population. Letkemann estimates that around three percent of Russian and Ukrainian Mennonites died as a result of the Civil War.

End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